

Cosmopolitanism in V.S. Naipaul's last novel, *Magic Seeds*

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Abstract:

The paper deals with the most recent novel of V.S. Naipaul, *Magic Seeds*. The study exposes how Willie Chandran, the protagonist of the novel, develops and changes his attitudes and outlook to the world and its history, and to the societies and individuals to become another person. This new person has his own identity after being lost among colonial, postcolonial and globalized societies. At last, he can identify himself as a cosmopolitan figure who can accept himself and others.

الكوزموبوليتانية في رواية نيبول الاخيرة " البذور السحرية"

الملخص:

يتناول البحث دراسة لرواية نيبول الاخيرة "البذور السحرية"، وعلاقتها بالكوزموبوليتانية (الشمولية). تعرض الرواية حياة البطل ويلي جاندرن ومراحل تطور شخصيته والتغيرات التي تحدث له في ضوء مغادرته لبلده الام الهند والهجرة الى انكلترا، ثم الى افريقيا، ثم المانيا، ثم الهند مرة اخرى واخيرا العودة الى انكلترا. يقوم البطل بتغيير نظراته للمجتمع والعالم بعد ان مر بعدة تجارب في حياته تجعله يتخذ لنفسه هوية جديدة: كوزموبوليتانية (شمولية).

Magic Seeds (2004) is Naipaul's latest novel. V.S. Naipaul is a prominent postcolonial novelist. The author reveals, through his protagonist, his cosmopolitan outlooks clearly after being trapped in postcolonial societies. The author comes with a new manner. His confidence is clear in technique and vision. It is not hard to find out that experiences and age has formed his new vision. It is Naipaul's imaginative universe which is framed with his humanistic value he creates in his novels, as a responsible realist novelist, to find the correct form to "capture something of the changes in the world, the changes in empire, the changes in the colonized" (Niven 5).

Cosmopolitanism is a very broad concept. It has a long history as a concept and a literature that goes back to ancient Greek thought (Delanty, 2012:21-2).

The word cosmopolitanism, etymologically, derives from the Greek

word "kosmopolites", which means "citizen of the world". It is dated back to Diogenes of the fourth century BC (Fine and Cohen 161). Diogenes declared himself as a citizen of the world. His statement remains the defining idea of cosmopolitanism. He denied the significance to be a citizen of or belong to Greek 'polis', on one hand. On the other, the statement holds a sense of openness, in which any person can embrace the world community, that is a part and quite different from the world he knew or lived in (Skrbis and Woodward 41-2). Referring to himself as "a citizen of the world", he refused to define himself by his local origin and group membership, and instead he preferred to define himself with more universal concern (Patell 4).

Cosmopolitanism has four main dimensions, many principles and no specific definition. There are moral,

political, cultural and the most recent, critical cosmopolitanism. Kendall et al. consider cosmopolitanism as tendency to see cultural differences and otherness as something desirable. It is a tendency to be open to the world around us and to be involved in it. They also suggest that cosmopolitanism may be defined as an attitude of openness, and that openness encompasses other principles. Openness to other cultures, practices and experiences is central to all dimensions of cosmopolitanism (113-4).

Hannerz defines the cosmopolitan as having "an intellectual and aesthetic stance of openness towards divergent cultural experiences" and a "willingness to engage with the other ". Thus, the general conception of cosmopolitanism comes from the idea of openness directly (1990: 239). In addition to openness, there are mobility, cultural competencies

and inclusivity, among the main principals of cosmopolitanism:

Cultural competencies refer to an individual's ability to know, command and create a variety of cultural knowledge to switch cultural codes as required as part of cultivating a sense of intercultural mastery (Hannerz, 1990:240).

Inclusivity is considered an essential stand for the cosmopolitan disposition. This means to value others, who are from another origin and culture outside one's own culture. Not just an inclusive view but also must be receptive to the cultural outputs of others and willing to engage with them, and attempting consciously to be familiar with people, objects and places outside one's national setting (ibid:201).

The rise of cosmopolitanism in present age is one of the consequences of

many elements that have huge impact. The contribution of the postcolonial and cultural studies, with contemporary cosmopolitan thinkers as Appiah (1996)² and Bhabha (1996)³ ought to be acknowledged. Also, the critiques of colonialism by theorists such as Mignolo (2010)⁴ and van der Veer (2002)⁵, challenging the more Eurocentric aspects of the field.

Naipaul's protagonist, in *Magic Seeds*, is a cosmopolitan person. Willie runs away from his homeland out of his feeling of shame being a son of a Brahmin and a Dalit woman. His mixed caste makes him hates himself, his family and his society leading him to run away to London.

In London, he spends three years, and then leaves with his girlfriend, Ana, to Africa (which was still a Portuguese colony) because he does not know where to go after his college education. Then,

he leaves Ana and Africa after spending eighteen years when a new war about to begin there. He goes to live temporary with his sister, Sarojini, who lives in Germany. Then, he goes back to India, following his sister's advice, in order to join a revolutionary movement which he and Sarojini think it to serve the poor and low caste people.

After spending seven years in the movement he manages to run away and surrenders to the police. Finally, he returns to England after spending six months under terms of special amnesty when his sister and his friend, Roger, interfere and convince the Indian authority to release him. Willie Chandran, the main character of the novel differs from Naipaul's protagonists in other works. Willie's character is realistic and serious, dealing with real problems of a man who has a colonial history and race discrimination. These

problems affect his psyche and make him feel that he is homeless and lost in the world, " not being at home anywhere, but looking at home"(Naipaul, 2004:74).

Willie's experiences in many geographical places, objectively speaking, comprise a single narrative of identity politics and migration, drawing a stark trajectory begins with the diaspora and the brutalization of people out of colonization and decolonization. Subjectively speaking, the protagonist keeping moves on to different geographies is a mean to resist the obligation to the locality. Willie feels that he is attached and at the same time detached to locality, therefore, he keeps moving on.

Considering Willie's dilemma, it is not simply about a personal tragedy of displacement and dislocation; it also shows how to achieve globality through the challenges the protagonist faces.

Willie Chandran, drifting in three continents, " never takes root, never builds a house, or becomes morally or financially independent" (King 180). When he realizes that his scholarship is at an end, he marries Ana fearing that the college will dismiss him, so he has to find a place to stay and a job to support him. When he abandons Ana, he goes to his sister's apartment in Berlin. In India, in the movement camping, the teak forest, in hotels, in the peasant's huts and the streets of tanners, he counts all the different beds since he was born as temporary, transitional ones.

Being in India for seven years, he never thinks to visit his parents. The second day after the Indian authority releases him he goes directly to the airport. He awakes in Roger's house in London, after thirty years. For the first time in his life, he thinks about his homelessness:

Then a new thought, issuing from the new person who had possessed him, assailed him: "I have never slept in a room of my own. Never at home in India, when I was a boy. Never here in London. Never in Africa. I lived in somebody else's house always, and slept in somebody else's bed. In the forest of course there were no rooms, and then the jail was the jail. Will I ever sleep in a room of my own?" And he marveled that he had never had a thought like that before."(177-8).

In Roger's house, he is also a stranger. Willie is homeless in spite of his multiple situations. He is "always someone on the outside" (6). However, Willie's cosmopolitan view comes from this very idea of being homeless. Home for Willie is unbearable condition and he cannot stand any available site and considering it of modernity as the main characteristic (Karajayerlian 45).

For Appiah, the stranger is a key to theorize cosmopolitan code of ethics(32). In his turn, Michael Pickering in *Stereotyping: the Politics of Representation* ensures the stranger's

his ultimate home. In the modern condition of exile, displacement, rootlessness and migration, home is constructed as a notion, rather than a place , a set of practices, rather than bonds bring people together (Xu 233).

In addition, the stranger engages the local and the global, the postcolonial and the modern. The stranger is theorized by Zygmunt Bauman as a person who is "undecidable" rather than a person who opposes; and such person troubles the separation of cultures, which is false. The presence of this stranger makes the ambivalence

chances for opening up scopes of advancement in cultures " through cultural dialogue and translation, through being receptive to encounters in the creative contact zone between ' near ' and ' far '(216). Appiah, Pickering and Bauman exposes that the stranger has a

double-consciousness and the merit of being so forms the cosmopolitan outlook.

Ulrich Beck and Natan Sznaider's definition of the new cosmopolitanism considering globalization supports Willie's behavior to some extent saying that " cosmopolitanization should be chiefly conceived of as globalization from within, as internalized cosmopolitanism" (9). Globalization altered people's life totally. As a result of imposing the global on the local, as any global process, in real life the global and the local are mixing together in new forms that require empirical and conceptual analyses. As a result of interaction with the global, people's life transformed. Cosmopolitanism in turn concerns how dynamically the global and the local are related. People's local situations and histories are viewed in the new cosmopolitan vision as part of a global world.

Migrants, as Willie Chandran, alter the metropolis, as London, and its singular politics moving in and between different contexts connecting the global with the local. Such people (transnational migrants) who change places and thoughts and even lifestyle do not necessarily have a cosmopolitan orientation, they create a space in the metropolis, their practices and encounters in this space become indicators of cosmopolitanism.

Naipaul suggests, through Willie Chandran, that cosmopolitan vision and global consciousness can be developed from ignorance and blindness even for subaltern migrants, strangers, outsiders and homeless people. Naipaul's protagonist does not start out as cosmopolitan figure. Willie's journey from monocular sight to stereoscopic vision, from blindness to insight takes place in stages. Stereoscopy is

manifested as a double-consciousness and reflexivity in the novel. Rebecca Walkowitz considers these two as poles of cosmopolitan style in her *Cosmopolitan Style* (12). Together, double-consciousness and stereoscopy are manifested in the protagonist of the novel (Karajayerlian 82).

At the beginning of the novel, Willie Chandran cannot envision a path for himself, or to reconcile India, Europe and Africa as three worlds to which he is attached. He is attached to India by birth, to England by education and to Africa by experience. Willie's inability comes from his feeling that he is estranged from his original culture and his feeling that he is out of context of both colonial and postcolonial societies. His primarily vision is fragmented and divided.

Naipaul produces Sarojini, Willie's sister, to be his motif to change and to rethink about his way of living his life,

ultimately, his attitudes and visions: "You've never felt there was anything for you to do. You've never understood that men have to make the world for themselves" (5-6).

Sarojini starts to chide and blame him for being a passive person and attributes his behavior and his feeling of being detached from his own culture to "the colonial psychosis, the caste psychosis" (6). The British imperialism considered the Hindu as servile races, what made deep psychological scars in the Indian psyche and they passed these scars to many generations. She adds that the Indian were deceived by the colonial force who distorted their history which they taught the Indian at schools, because the Indian history was written by the British. The Indian feeling of inferiority is the result of the portrayals of the colonialists, which are distorted.

According to this vision, cosmopolitanism is the perfect solution for the colonial psyche, identifying itself with the cultural politics of anti-colonialism. It gives the cosmopolitan outlook that combines the global with the local concerns, and thus becomes a way to dismiss the colonial self from one's psyche (Etinson 37).

Sarojini, in her turn, gets her cosmopolitan identity and vision through her marriage to a German film-maker. With her husband, she travels to many countries, especially Third-World countries. By filming documentaries, she study the manner and politics of revolution. She finds out that all proletariat revolutions hold an idea to correct the history's wrongs. Actually, she and her husband aestheticize the revolution to others.

At the beginning of *Magic Seeds*, Sarojini discusses Willie and tells him

that revolution is part of the cosmopolitan identity since its main concern is change, "If everybody had said that, there would never have been any revolution anywhere. We all have wars to go to" (7). This speech shows that she really cares about other people and wants to make difference, but she is a passive cosmopolitan. She does not participate but pushes others to do so. However, Willie's vision has changed. Sarojini plays a critical role in Willie's life, and she succeeds to change him and make him another person, although of her wrong ways and thinking.

In Berlin, she observes a young Tamil man. His work is selling roses in restaurants. She thinks that the young man deserves more than her brother Willie because he supports the revolution back home and Willie does nothing in his life.

Sarojini considers the guerrilla warfare and revolutionary people as miracle to confront imperial history and correct its wrongs. She talks to Willie about a great man called Kandapalli and argues him to join his guerrilla. Sarojini represents an outside critic and does not interfere to change. Willie, unlike his sister, participates and becomes one of the guerrilla's members hoping to change, to do something, to become active in the world. However, he realizes that Sarojini global view is far from the reality of the local revolution. His journey shows him that everything is wrong in the guerrilla camp and its members are criminals rather than reformers. They adopt the old ideas of Marx and Mao which emphasizes on liquidating the class enemy. But in the villages, there is no class enemy left (Xu 51).

Willie and Keso, one of the revolutionaries, meet a revolutionary

mad man who thinks that murder is his gift to the poor. Destruction and violence, for the revolutionaries, become a gift through repackaging them to suit their ambitions. Willie's experience in the forest with the guerrilla camp members is negative, thus, offers a critique of cosmopolitanism in relation to Sarojini's version.

Sarojini regrets her passive cosmopolitanism when Willie is sent to jail and taken a ten years sentence confessing: "I am not too happy with what I have done, though everything was always with the best of intentions. It is awful to say, but I believe I have sent many people to their doom in many countries "(153).

In India, Willie manages to meet Joseph following Sarojini's instructions. He is a Christian university lecturer. It is apparent that he is educated man; therefore no one will suspect that he

supports the revolutionaries' back. Meeting Joseph is the first station for Willie in India. He is very careful in his work that he can mislead the authorities easily. Willie is recruited by Joseph who plays another important role in his journey.

Joseph starts to inform Willie about a forgotten part of Indian history. He talks to him about the various invasions which had destroyed and enslaved Indians for many centuries. Joseph thinks that the destruction was so tremendous and deep that it is beyond repair: "You have no idea of the extent to which the victors won and the losers lost here" (43). His pessimistic reading of the Indian situation makes him think that the Indian have lost their origin and their characters have melted, and then taken the shape their oppressors designed for them. Joseph, through his speech, wants to reach the outcome that low caste and

peasants are beyond hope. They are mentally, physically and spiritually broken that even after the departure of the past lords to the cities, the peasants still passive and cannot claim to own the lands. For Joseph, the only solution is revolution: " I would love nothing better than to see a revolution sweeping everything away" (41).

After recruiting Willie, he joins Kandapalli's movement which is a "revolution from below" as the author calls it. It is supposed to follow Mao's line and its main target is to liberate the lands from feudal lords who come with a new colonial face. Willie wakes up to find himself within a guerilla wing.

What happened that the movement increases the economic and social gap between the poor peasants and middle classes. Willie realizes this truth and reveals it in his letters to his sister. He finds exactly the opposite, a thing he

does not intend to do. Willie thought that he can participate to help subalterns by giving them a voice and place in the world; but he discovers that the revolution actually represses the poor, making them trapped in their backwardness leaving them behind in the global world order (Naipaul,2004: 201).

Revolution, however, is doomed to failure because the leaders are corrupt and their intentions are not honest. For Joseph, one of the leaders, leadership represents a personal ambition and he would do anything for power. For the other, obtaining power is a psychological drive to cover up his physical weakness. Therefore, suspicion is raised about the possibility of any positive transformation in the society with the corrupt leadership.

The protagonist's failure in trying to reconstruct India is shown to be not a personal failure, but it is a failure of India as a nation as the novel implies. Weiss

analyses Naipaul's approach to India as an "idea" rather than real observation of place (18). Naipaul shows traditional forces in India as a restriction of the agency of the colonial subjects for personal and national growth; and also resists transformation of the corrupt and passive system. Thus, India cannot transform easily, individuals have no choice but to give up the idea of belonging and can only choose their habitats.

After his failure with the revolutionary movement in *Magic Seeds* Willie, now in the Indian jail, talks about the Indian peasants in different way, to be one of the most obvious signs of shifting his attitudes from blindness to cosmopolitan insight. His evolution is marked by his sympathy towards those peasants, he writes to his sister:

That war was not yours or mine and it had nothing to do with the village people we said we were fighting for. We talked about their oppression, but we were exploiting them all the time. Our ideas and words were more important than their lives and their ambitions for themselves. That was terrible to me, and it continues even here, where the talkers have favoured treatment and the poor are treated as the poor always are. They are mostly village people and they are undersized and thin. The most important thing about them is their small size. It is hard to associate them with the bigger crimes and the crimes of passion for which some of them are being punished. Abduction, kidnapping. I suppose if you were a villager you would see them as criminal and dangerous, but if you see them from a distance, as I still see them, although I am close to them night and day, you would be moved by the workings of the human soul, so complete within those frail bodies. Those wild and hungry eyes haunt me. They seem to me to carry a distillation of the country's unhappiness. (161-2)

It is his cosmopolitan perspective that makes him say such statements. He reads the members of the guerrilla and the villagers very carefully. He does not consider the guerrilla members as simply

criminals, but as a tragic result of the ideologies fed by abstract mottos and global ideas (Maoism and Marxism). And the Indian villagers are not simply victims of imperial oppression and caste system, but they are marginalized characters forever in the global theatre; and that is because of their strangeness to and distance from global modernity.

Willie Chandran's ability to analyze the local situation through the global background of inequality and change by putting the Indians interior in the context of a wider world, makes him acquires such cosmopolitan vision. Both sympathy and critical distance point out that Willie's cosmopolitan awareness begins to spring.

At the airport, after his freedom from jail, he notices poor migrants with their luggage and this view makes him feels "old stirrings, the beginning of old grief "(169). This view makes him realizes that

now the conditions of the subalterns are the same in the two worlds (The First and The Third) on a global scale. In addition, his transnational mobility makes him accepts to be within the kingdom of cosmopolitans and accepts also the fact that migrants who are under class are exploited.

In the era of globalization, cosmopolitanism is not only about the mobility of people (elite and plebeian), but also about the mobility of ideas and images, lifestyle and objects. In London, when Willie revisits old places, he notices that the crowded streets are full with Arabs, black people and Japanese. He realizes that a great change has happened. The world has altered forever. He understands that "the world is now being shaken by forces much bigger than I could have imagined...Now I can only celebrate what I am, or what I have become."(188).

Multicultural migrants have changed the world and London, meanwhile an unparalleled wave of capitalist development rises. Both of them are signs of globalization: financial expansion and property development is used to replace or cover materialism, whereas the subaltern are unable to reestablish themselves in the mass migration yet. And that is why Willie does not feel at ease with the presence of Peter, the rich banker who is Roger's friend.

Willie's experience in the guerrilla camp in the forest and his experience in the jail affect him and make him see his spiritual and physical triviality which has discard his "materialist self "(202). With cosmopolitanism, he acquires a new perspective to examine the other people, "unless we understand people's other side, Indian, Japanese, African, we

cannot truly understand them "(202). He begins to look at people differently.

In London, he starts to work in an architecture company. In the training center a sudden epiphany comes to him, with his new knowledge of the basis of architecture:

It is terrible and heart breaking that this way of seeing and understanding has come to me so late. I can't do anything with it now. A man of fifty cannot remake his life...But I have a sense now that when I was in Africa, for all those eighteen years, when I was in the prime of life, I hardly knew where I was. And that time in the forest was as dark and confusing as it was at the time. I was so condemning of other people on the course. How vain and foolish. I am no different from them. (220)

Willie's new "ways of seeing and understanding" is a clear signs of his cosmopolitan perspective that operates on local and global level of identification. There is no conflict, for

Willie, between the two, that leads the local to cancel the global or vice versa. Situating himself as a cosmopolitan and holds cosmopolitan view leads him at last to identify himself in the postcolonial, globalized world.

His cosmopolitan view reconciles the three worlds he inhabits: India, Europe and Africa and plays as a geographical marker between the landscapes. Finally, Willie Chandran, the colonial migrant figure, succeeds in freeing his psyche from the colonial self. His cosmopolitan outlook which he exercises critically gives him a new understanding of both the local and the dilemma of belonging and the global and its challenges.

In England, in the name of mass empowerment, the socialist revolution represents the nurturing factor of cultural decline and also cultural alteration. In post imperial England, the vanishing of the servant class, as Roger views, which

comes to reappear in the council houses is a sign of dissolution of the bonds of families lives which leads to at last to the disintegration of social cohesion.

In *Magic Seeds*, and through Willie Chandran's perspective, Naipaul exposes that English socialist policy and Indian Marxist revolution become counterproductive, measures; they both fail to regenerate the populace truly.

Willie's cosmopolitanism, in *Magic Seeds*, is self-reflexive since his activities are mostly expressed psychologically. He criticizes cultures, his own culture and English culture, showing a cosmopolitan politics through his confession and retrospection. This move from a static, limited gaze upon the postcolonial world to a stereoscopic, dynamic view which encompasses both the global and the local view, criticizes both is a significant step towards cosmopolitan outlook (Xu 53).

At the beginning of Willie's journey he almost did nothing significant in his life. Even writing, he gives up after the poor reception from publishers. He becomes frustrated and angry. And he never thinks to write again, even though the Indian authority releases him from jail because of being a former "pioneer of modern Indian writing" (Naipaul, 2004:168). Writing, for Willie, fails to release him from his personal, colonial experience and gives a meaning or a motif to his life. And this is new in Naipaul's works; his protagonists almost always depend on writing to feel well, just like Naipaul himself.

Cosmopolitanism therefore, becomes important in real world. Applicably, it admits developments and choices of individuals hoping to contribute in the world not only exist in it in the era of globalization. Cosmopolitanism, after all "denotes an ideal" whereas globalization

"signifies an empirical phenomena
"(Papastephanou 75).

Unlike Naipaul's previous novels, *Magic Seeds* concentrates on achieving the cosmopolitan position, and if it is possible to do that, from a participant holds a global point of view (like Willie Chandran) and not from a detached observer (like the protagonist of other novels). Naipaul shows us the dark side of globalization, through Willie Chandran who wasted his life. Surely, globalization provides much of the raw material of cosmopolitanism, but the expression of cosmopolitan disposition is not guaranteed. It needs a historical, critical attention to be identified to the expansive globe because all people may become globalized but they may lose control on their own fate besides the world.

In the last part of the novel which is set as "Magic Seeds", the author

introduces the reader to the final scene which manifests a cosmopolitan scene, the wedding. Naipaul shows a picture of two couples and two families from different races, cultures and colures. Marcus, the West African man who is obsessed to change his genes and insists to have a white grandson, at last succeeds. His son has now two children, a black boy and a fair girl from a white English woman. The couple decides to marry and Marcus is so happy because his dream came true. Roger and Willie are invited to attend the wedding. Willie observes that "people were in two distinct streams, the dark and the fair. Soon, and nervously they began to converge "(274). The scene tells that people begin to accept each other and such view begin to be familiar in the society. The scene displays the happiness around and describes the groom and the bride "like stars in the middle of a chorus on a stage" (277).

There is another beautiful scene in the wedding. The fair girl, who is Marcus's grand-child, begins to cry, Marcus runs to her and takes "her little hand" (278). He begins to walk her slowly. The scene stirs the crowd:

Someone, an old lady, seeing the old grey-haired black man running to the distressed white child, imagined old sentimentalities and involuntarily clapped, very delicately; then someone else clapped; and then Marcus and his grandchild were walking to general applause, and Marcus, understanding only after some seconds that the applause was meant for him, and meant kindly, began to smile, looking to the left and right, bowing slightly, and leading the white child to where she wanted to go.(279).

This scene does not only display the tolerance and interaction within people; but also displays an important evolution towards embracing cosmopolitan lifestyle which became necessary in our globalized world. After his return from the wedding party to the hotel, Willie spends his night thinking in his past life. His memories mingle with the music of the wedding. His memory takes him back to the grey stone hills of Arica and African who were "walking on the red paths beside the asphalt road". He remembers the houses and the windows. He remembers himself in the forest with the men dressing in olive uniform putting caps and the red satin star on them, the jail and the prisoners' miserable situation.

Through *Magic Seeds*, Naipaul adopts cosmopolitan view which offers a critique for the middle and lower-class revolution accusing them of being not honest, have no regenerative vision and

for not speaking for the plebeians truly. They are led by blind people holding a revolutionary ideas lead only to massive killing and dangerous ideas to clean culture and society from aliens. In their quest for historical retribution, such people fall prey to history which evolve and rise only to fall and collapse again. To change the world positively, Naipaul thinks that improvement should start from inside. This is the very reason why Naipaul and his protagonist Willie Chandran decide to embrace cosmopolitanism. Everyone must make or remake him/herself to find out his way in life and to find what is important to him; then take part as an active doer to improve the world.

Cosmopolitanism, for Naipaul, is suitable for the global life. He exposes his view through his *Magic Seeds*, to be his last novel and his view to be his last one also. He considers cosmopolitan

lifestyle as humanistic ideal continues to progress and embedded in modernity as its structural condition.

Willie can find himself at last among a cosmopolitan society that serves troubled figures like him.

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